

the sad news of the death of
Sidney Peterson on April 24, 2000.

Pioneer Bay Area Filmmaker Passes Away in New York City.

Sidney Peterson an American Surrealist artist, writer and father of independent and experimental filmmaking in San Francisco, passed away Monday April 24 In New York City. Sidney Peterson with his film *The Potted Psalm* (1946), made in collaboration with poet James Broughton (1913-1999), explored new frontiers in experimental cinema. Peterson made the San Francisco's first personal art films as demonstrated in *The Potted Psalm* (1946) and *The Cage* (1947). These Surrealist classics inaugurated the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in Cinema film series, started by Frank Stauffacher in 1946.

Peterson taught the nation's first fine art filmmaking courses at the California School of Fine Arts (today the San Francisco Art Institute), known as Workshop 20. With his students, Peterson made a series of complex short, non-narrative films that drew inspiration from the psychological landscape of post-WWII San Francisco, figurative abstraction and music concrete. Peterson's best known films from this period are *Mr. Frenhofer* and *the Menotaur* (1948) and *The Lead Shoes* (1949).

"The Lead Shoes proposes a comic vision that is not at all funny. Extravagant, exhausting, open to the fortuitous and the unintended, its picaresque narrative transforms the dark region of unconscious impulse into an intellectual burlesque. The "story" disintegrates into a warped tissue of allusions and visual puns riddled by ellipses and audio-visual shifts."-Stuart Leibman

Peterson was attracted to the Surrealist School of Cinema with its marvelous imagery drawn from the subconscious dream state and its unfamiliar time relationships. In accordance with Surrealist painting, Peterson made films that often distorted camera imagery so that the viewer's world became shifted in perspective.

"One thing the Museum of Modern Art taught me was that San Francisco has been an important center of production for short artistic films since the latter 1940's"-Sidney Peterson

Sidney Peterson was born in Oakland, California, November 15, 1905. Attended University of California, Berkeley. He was a newspaper reporter for Monterey Herald in early 1920s. He lived in Paris and Southern France in late '20s, early '30s, painting and sculpting. He married Ruth Bosley and moved back to Berkeley, California; wife died shortly thereafter. He married Bernice Van Gelder and moved to San Francisco. Co-founded Orbit Films with Robert Gardner in 1950 to make documentaries. Museum of Modern Art, New York City: Director of Educational Television production, 1954-1955. Moved family to Santa Fe, New Mexico where he began writing a novel. United Productions of America (UPA), Los Angeles, California: Scriptwriter for animated series on lives of historical figures, especially artists, 1955-1956. Walt Disney Productions, Los Angeles: Scriptwriter and storyboard artist for *Fantasia II* (never completed), 1957-1958. Returned to San Francisco to finish novel, *A Fly in the Pigment*, published in 1961. Remained in San Francisco, writing and lecturing until he and his wife moved to England in the early '70s. From England they returned to live in New York City. In 1981 he made a film with Marjorie Keller. *Man in the Bubble*. His second wife died in 1990. He is survived daughter, Nora, who lives in New York City and he has one

grandchild, Kevin.

Selected Filmography:

The Cage (1947)
Clinic of Stumble (1947)
Horror Dream (1947)
The Potted Psalm made with James Broughton (1947)
The Petrified Dog (1948)
The Lead Shoes (49)
Mr. Frenhofer and the Minotaur (1949)
Invisible Moustache of Raol Dufy (1954-55)
The Day of the Fox (1956)
The Merry Go Round in the Jungle (1956)
Man in a Bubble (1981)

For further information regarding these films contact Dominic Angerame or David Sherman at Canyon Cinema at 415-626-2255.

Rebecca Barton

David Sherman
Dominic Angerame

From: "Philip S. Solomon" <solomon@STRIPE.COLORADO.EDU>
Organization: University of Colorado at Boulder
Subject: Re: Sidney Peterson
To: FRAMEWORKS@LISTSERV.AOL.COM

Here is a little known anecdote about the picture gracing page 171 of DARK OF THE SCREEN (Sidney in front of a warped, fun house type mirror, a la LEAD SHOES, etc. You may recall that he gave his anamorphic lens to Stan for Dog Star Man, which makes this story even better). That picture was taken at a Halloween party/screening at the Boston Film Video Foundation in 1978 and it is....somewhat cropped. What you don't see, off to the right Sidney's right, is filmmaker Mark Lapore wearing a skeleton mask with giant, outsized sunglasses - and I'm sitting to Sidney's left wearing a ...Brakhage mask... with granny glasses on (using the giant close-up of SB from the first page of METAPHORS ON VISION) and a sporting a beagle surrounded by a star on my old Mike Nesmith double breasted shirt (yes, I went as Dog Star Man, wouldn't you know...but this was the time of Punk, after all...). Can't imagine why they cut us out for the book. The original picture hangs on my studio wall. Eerie. Hilarious. Sidney.

The caption under the photo in the book reads:

S.P. in Boston, October 28, 1978, by Robert Del Tredici. Taken after a lecture in front of a distorting mirror. The rear reflection of my head is a striking likeness of William Heick, who played in The Petrified Dog in 1948. Is this Brakhage's nomenclative curse, to be forever haunted by an unending "mirage of structures?"

Phil Solomon

Corey Creekmur wrote:

> I didn't know Mr. Peterson, but am also very sorry to hear of his death;
> his films are wonderful and remain quite unique, and so is his insightful
> and often hilarious book THE DARK OF THE SCREEN. Anyone who wants to read

> about the glory days of the American avant-garde should find a copy. Corey
>

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Reply-To: Experimental Film Discussion List <FRAMEWORKS@LISTSERV.AOL.COM>

Sender: Experimental Film Discussion List <FRAMEWORKS@LISTSERV.AOL.COM>

From: Dominic Angerame <danger3456@HOTMAIL.COM>

Subject: Sidney Peterson

To: FRAMEWORKS@LISTSERV.AOL.COM

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HOME Visitor: SIDNEY PETERSON

In 1995, when we learned that the 90 year old American Surrealist filmmaker and writer, Sidney Peterson would be travelling to San Francisco for several shows in The Bay Area, we got his phone number in Riverdale, NY and invited him to have a show at TOTAL MOBILE HOME. He agreed to have "a salon"-offering his perspective on every decade of this century ("You know I attended the riot at very first screening of Dali and Bunuel's *Le Chien Andalou* in Paris"). Several months later, 25 people attended a Friday night screening and conversation with the near-blind Peterson.

At his show the night before, At The Art Institute, he had required a guide to navigate him to the lectern at the front of the auditorium where he seemed dwarfed and overwhelmed by the lighting and scale of the large auditorium. In our own tiny basement space however, he sat comfortably in an armchair (exported from our upstairs living room) positioned next to an old standing lamp. The audience, as usual was a mixture of young and old people, some had read his books, some were film artists, some had just walked in off the street lured by our small illuminated CINEMA sign unaware that they were in the company of a man of immense and arcane learning- one of the originators of the American avant-garde cinema. As people settled in their seats, without introduction, Peterson began to speak, reading from *The Dark of the Screen*: "I am convinced that the appeal a live artist has for an audience is the opportunity afforded to appraise his general state of health. Is he long for this world or isn't he? Naturally, there are subcultures for which none of this holds true. Some embrace the present because it relieves them of the need to know about the past. A trendy nostalgia is a sign of aging. Old movies make the young their own posterity. It is not an easy world in which to remain contemporary." He looked up at all of us smiling and leaning forward and the wonderful evening began.

>From A *microCINEMA PRIMER* by Rebecca Barten -TOTAL MOBILE HOME (1999)

A MOVIE HOUSE IS AN ENLARGED CAMERA OBSCURA FOR THE SALE OF POPCORN, A DARKROOM FOR STAR-GAZING RIGHT SIDE UP "It happened so slowly, the dawning of the idea that film could be an art. One had the experience but not the idea. I vaguely recall an *Oliver Twist* in twelve reels (it had to be the Pathe 1909 version, if not the 1910 Vitagraph treatment, or, conceivably the 1912 independent production of Nat C. Goodwin as Fagin) that was so grim it had to be something more than entertainment.

A year later, at the Panama Pacific International Exposition, I saw Chaplin making something and the seeds of future improvisation were firmly planted. Rather later, I had a friend whose father, a Unitarian minister, was a friend of Vachel Lindsay, from whom he had caught a, to me incomprehensible, passion for movies as something more than they seemed to be. And then, in the early 'twenties, I remember being vaguely affected by Elie Faure's Art of Cine-plastics in The Freeman with its vision of things to come; "what the art of the cinemimic may presume to become if, instead of permitting itself to be dragged by theatrical processes through a desolating sentimental fiction, it is able to concentrate itself on plastic processes, around a sensuous and passionate action in which we can all recognize our own personal virtues." I'm no longer sure that I know what he was talking about but at the time, Faure was an enormously impressive figure. If he chose to pontificate about movies, who was I not to listen? It was a curious period. A lot of Americans were feeling the need for a little rhetorical hyping to compensate for the lack of excitement in their own aesthetic preperceptions. It was part of an alleged national coming of age and if a Frenchman wanted to extend our illusions by envisaging an art of film that was not only "lively" but plastique, we were ready for it, whatever it might mean and however it might be understood by an art industry pre-occupied with the need to straddle the gap between art and the imperatives of mass amusement, the need "to be dragged by theatrical processes through a desolating sentimental fiction."

-Sidney Peterson, The Dark of the Screen
